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NATO's Changing Its Posture Against Russia From Assurance to Deterrence: Does It Matter?

by

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Biography

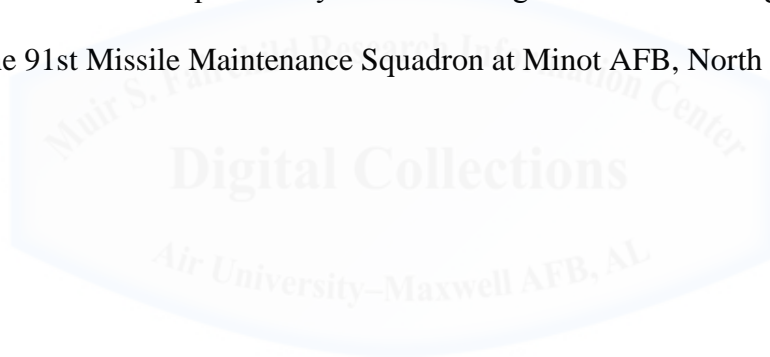
Colonel King enlisted in the Air Force in 1985 and performed various duties in the security police (SP) career field. His two overseas assignments include a tour in the Middle East in 1987 and service in Desert Shield/Desert Storm as a fire team leader performing air base ground defense duties in support of F-111 tactical fighter-bomber operations at Taif Air Base, Saudi Arabia. Colonel King's enlisted career culminated in his position as noncommissioned officer in charge of a 203-person SP operations flight. He attained the rank of Technical Sergeant prior to earning his commission through Officer Training School in 1996.

In 1996, Colonel King was assigned to Cape Canaveral Air Station, Florida, where he held various positions in support of the \$250M Titan IV Spacelifter and highest priority satellite programs for the National Reconnaissance Office, Department of Defense, and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). He directed a 125-member team and provided go/no-go recommendations for booster operations for NASA's \$3B Cassini mission to Saturn.

In 2000, Colonel King was assigned to Malmstrom AFB, Montana, as a missile combat crew commander and later as the Chief of Evaluation Operations, responsible for assessing the combat proficiency of 300+ combat crew members. Additionally, he participated in the launch of an unarmed Minuteman III Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) in Air Force Space Command's operational/test evaluation program to verify nuclear force readiness.

In 2003, Colonel King was assigned to Vandenberg AFB, California, as an instructor for newly-assigned missile operators. He was later selected to be the Operations Officer and second in command of the 532d Training Squadron, assuming responsibility for training electro-mechanical, missile-mechanical, and facility maintenance technicians for advanced air-launched missile maintenance and ICBM maintenance for three major commands.

After attending Air Command and Staff College and Joint Forces Staff College, Colonel King served as a Program Analyst at United States Strategic Command. In this capacity, he engaged the Joint Staff, Office of Secretary of Defense, and the Services to direct \$18B to programs supporting USSTRATCOM missions. During this period, Colonel King deployed to the Office for the Administrative Review of the Detention of Enemy Combatants, assisting various Executive Branch agencies determine proper disposition of enemy combatants held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. He also served as Chief, ICBM Current Operations Branch on the Air Force Global Strike Command staff. During his staff tenure, Colonel King deployed as commander of an air expeditionary group detachment supporting counter-piracy operations in the Africa Command area of responsibility. Colonel King's most recent assignment was as commander of the 91st Missile Maintenance Squadron at Minot AFB, North Dakota.



“We are prepared to fight and win if we have to ... our focus will expand from assurance to deterrence, including measures that vastly improve our overall readiness.”

General Phillip M. Breedlove, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe¹

Introduction

Russia’s seizure of Crimea in the Ukraine rung alarm bells in the West, raising fears of a resurgent Russia intent on regaining its former dominance in Eastern Europe. Over the last two years, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has renewed its focus on defending its member nations from an aggressive and resurgent Russia. This focus encompasses a switch from assurance, which the United States and NATO have relied on during the post-Cold War era, to deterrence which is more in line with its posture against the former Soviet Union.

NATO was created in 1949 as part of a broader effort to serve three purposes: deterring Soviet expansionism, forbidding the revival of nationalist militarism in Europe through a strong North American presence on the continent, and encouraging European political integration.² During the Cold War, NATO pursued deterrence by both punishment and denial.³ Deterrence by punishment sent a message based on ‘unactable damages’, which included a threat of massive nuclear retaliation for any Soviet attack – conventional or nuclear.⁴ Through deterrence by denial, NATO deployed a forward defense at its eastern border with the Soviet Union in order to make it physically difficult for the communist nation to achieve its expansionist objective.⁵

After the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO’s deterrence posture deteriorated as the world view shifted. Its forces, conventional and nuclear, were dramatically downsized and nation members consistently reduced their defense spending contributions.⁶ Additionally, NATO experienced an atrophy of deterrence know-how, including planning, exercises, messaging and decision-

making.⁷ This is because NATO's post-Cold War security environment changed. NATO became more involved in crises like the western Balkans and Afghanistan.⁸

Following the Cold War, NATO no longer considered Russia an adversary and some of the former states have since become members of the alliance. As a result, the size of NATO's military presence has been significantly reduced over the years. There may also be a question of the commitment of some of its members when it comes to monetary contributions. Each nation is expected to expend the equivalent of two percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) in support of NATO.⁹ However, many nations fall very short of that number. In fact, of the 28 countries in the alliance, only five—the U.S., Greece, Poland, Estonia and the U.K.—meet the target.¹⁰

However, Russia's aggression against Ukraine beginning in 2014 and the rise of the Islamic State has been a turning point in NATO's focus on defense.¹¹ In response, NATO has boosted its political and military responsiveness, and has made efforts to increase the readiness of its force.¹² A good example is its Readiness Action Plan (RAP) measures—on land, at sea, and in the air—which have been taken to reassure Allies in Eastern Europe.¹³

The United States has done its part to demonstrate its commitment to NATO over the past two years. On June 3, 2014, President Barack Obama announced the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) in order to counter Russia's provocative military actions.¹⁴ Congress provided nearly a billion dollars to fund the initiative.¹⁵ ERI consists of three key pillars: (1) Operation ATLANTIC RESOLVE which includes a persistent, rotational presence of U.S. forces in Central Europe deployed from bases in the U.S. and Western Europe; (2) Provision of security assistance to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to help them better defend themselves against Russia and be able to work more effectively with U.S. and NATO forces; and (3) a commitment to improving

responsiveness of U.S. forces to contingencies in Central Europe including “exploring initiatives such as prepositioning of equipment and improving reception facilities in Europe.”¹⁶

The Russian threat has certainly garnered the attention of other NATO members. Western European defense spending cuts that have endured for the past two decades have come to an end. Norway is planning to purchase 52 F-35 fighters, replace its submarine fleet, purchase new surveillance aircraft, upgrade tank units, and acquire new anti-aircraft systems.¹⁷ The Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have also decided to increase their defense spending.¹⁸ Even neutral Sweden is planning for an additional \$2 billion to purchase armored personnel carriers, artillery, anti-tank weapons and air defense systems.¹⁹

NATO’s posture change from assurance to deterrence at the 2016 Warsaw Summit is most notable in NATO’s intent to deploy four battalions to Poland and the Baltic States; with three of those battalions provided by the UK, Germany, and Canada. This is clear evidence that members of the alliance are doing more to share the burden and reflects the seriousness of their perception of Russia’s recent aggressions.

Responding to NATO’s shift from assurance to deterrence, the U.S. is increasing 2017 ERI funding levels to \$3.4 billion.²⁰ This will permit more rotational U.S. forces in Europe, more training and exercises with NATO allies, more prepositioning and warfighting gear.²¹ It will also provide infrastructure improvements to facilitate a more credible defense posture for the U.S. and its NATO allies.²² The additional funding ensures that all U.S. military services will augment their presence and enhance deterrence in Europe through stepped-up rotations and potential deferral of previously planned force reductions.²³ Additionally, ERI will expand the scope of 28 joint and multi-national exercises, which annually train over 18,000 U.S. personnel alongside 45,000 NATO allies and Partnership for Peace personnel across 40 countries.²⁴

However, it does not fund an increase in the number of U.S. troops permanently stationed in Europe, but it will support the presence of additional rotational forces that help us meet our collective defense obligations to NATO allies.²⁵

Another area where NATO Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has consciously and conspicuously deemphasized nuclear weapons in its defense policy.²⁶ Consequently, NATO no longer possesses the policies and capabilities needed to deter, much less respond to, a limited Russian nuclear strike.²⁷ Russia, on the other hand, has increasingly emphasized nuclear weapons in its national security planning since the end of the Cold War.²⁸

During the Ukraine crisis in August 2014, Putin said, “I want to remind you that Russia is one of the leading nuclear powers...It’s best not to mess with us.”²⁹ Russia has also indicated that, if necessary, it might deploy nuclear weapons in Crimea, Kaliningrad, and Syria.³⁰ Putting considered alerting Russian nuclear weapons during the Crimean crisis, stating “We were ready to [put nuclear forces on alert]...It was a frank and open position. And that is why I think no one was in the mood to start a world war.”³¹

As NATO again faces a real nuclear threat from Moscow, it must once again, like during the Cold War, cultivate a serious policy of and capability for nuclear deterrence.³² To deter the Russian nuclear threat, NATO needs to realign its priorities by increasing the importance of its nuclear deterrence mission and considering possible modifications to its conventional and nuclear posture.³³

DETERRENCE AND ASSURANCE

Keith Payne defines deterrence as “a strategy of issuing threats to cause another to decide against an unwanted behavior.”³⁴ Rationality, the use of threats, and messaging all play a role in effective deterrence.

Rationality is important in that it must be understood that not all states in a particular contest have the same values or the common misperception that all states agree on what is or is not rational. In fact, a rational actor takes actions to maximize its utility based on what it values. Knowing and understanding what your adversary values goes a long way in helping decision makers make predictions about what an adversary will do in various scenarios to advance its national interests.

As mentioned above, deterrence is as strategy of using threats. According to Payne, the recipient of those threats “must have the will and capability to comply with the issued demand, and it must understand, believe, and fear the deterrent threat to the extent that it chooses to comply.”³⁵ A prime example of the successful use of threats in deterrence was the explicit threat of nuclear retaliation by the United States against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The enemy must know which actions are proscribed in order to be deterred. Therefore, a state must clearly “message” to their adversary what the actions are that it intends to deter, what the consequences will be to the adversary if it doesn’t comply, and what the reward will be if it does comply. The “reward” may simply be the absence of punishment, or it may be a tangible reward.

Assurance involves convincing an ally of the United States’ commitment to, and capability for, extended deterrence for the purpose of dissuading the ally for the purpose of dissuading the ally from developing its own nuclear arsenal.³⁶

It is difficult to characterize a framework or theory for assurance. However, achieving assurance can be complex and demanding. In fact, the task of building and sustaining trust and confidence among people, organizations, and countries proves to be more difficult than deterrence.³⁷ Another thing to consider is that the United States and its allies do not necessarily assess credibility in a similar fashion. The United States' reason usually revolves around shared interests, its own capability, formal agreements, policy, and intent.³⁸ Affected allies, on the other hand, pay close attention to how the United States' commitments might falter when fulfilling them becomes too risky or costly.³⁹ As a result, a strong credibility of extended deterrence is vital to achieve necessary assurance to allies.⁴⁰

Also, efforts taken in the name of assurance can potentially have negative side effects.⁴¹ That is, these efforts might cause allies to conduct activities that are not in the best interests of the United States despite possibly being in the ultimate interests of the ally.⁴² The ambiguous assurances of the United States on matters relating to China and Taiwan are prime examples of avoiding these negative side effects.⁴³

In order to be successful in its assurance efforts, the United States must use all forms of national power. Success depends on coercive diplomacy as much as deterrence capability.⁴⁴ Deterring certain actions and the ability to influence events more generally, sometimes coercively, is vital to the strength of security relationships.⁴⁵ Finally, to be successful at assurance, the United States must be seen as capable of adapting to shifting power alignments in ways acceptable to its security partners.⁴⁶

NATO's RESPONSE TO RUSSIA'S RESURGENCE

The resurgence of Russia has spurred NATO into action. Since 2015, sixteen NATO members have increased spending on defense.⁴⁷ Overall, European defense spending increased

by 8.3 percent in 2016⁴⁸. Additionally, the United States has quadruple its military spending for European operations from \$789 million to \$3.4 billion.⁴⁹ Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, before departing his post as Supreme Allied Commander Europe, said that NATO is “moving from assurance to deterrence.”⁵⁰

Unfortunately, this shift from assurance to deterrence follows years of underfunding by NATO members that has led to “alarming deficiencies in the state of NATO preparedness” according to the British government.⁵¹ This is especially evident among its four largest members—Great Britain, Germany, France and the United States. For example, as of the summer of 2016, spending cuts have reduced the Royal Navy from 89 ships to 65.⁵² Great Britain’s combat aircraft fleet shrank to 149 warplanes from 189; and its helicopter fleet had been reduced to 164 from its 2008 levels of 257.⁵³ Of Germany’s 109 Eurofighters, only 42 are in flying condition.⁵⁴ Additionally, Germany only had 225 Leopard II tanks, compared to over 2,000 during the Cold War.⁵⁵ Also, France has eliminated 8,000 personnel from its military in the past two years while recently decreasing its air fleet by 30 percent and its warship inventory to 19.⁵⁶ The United States, for its part, only had 26,000 troops stationed in Europe in 2016 compared to 40,000 in 2012 and 300,000 during the Cold War.⁵⁷

Now, NATO began planning to deploy battalions in Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania to deter Russia from conducting activities similar to those carried out in Ukraine.⁵⁸ It is hoped that this will deter Putin from the ambiguous, anonymous warfare he has waged in Ukraine.⁵⁹ The United States, for its part, is increasing its deterrent strength by permanently basing fully manned brigades in Europe.⁶⁰

THE NUCLEAR VIEW

WHERE IS NATO HEADED?

Since the end of the Cold War, and especially after the turn of the century, the United States and NATO have backed away from the strong deterrence efforts demonstrated against the former Soviet Union, allowing a resurgent Russia to strike fear into many of NATO's newest, most-Eastern nations. The actions taken by the United States and NATO since Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine are only a starting point for a much more significant policy approach switching from assurance to deterrence. The following are ways that NATO is headed toward achieving this significant policy change.

A push for each NATO member to meet the goal of contributing 2 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) toward military spending in support of the alliance.

To address the security vacuum created in Europe by the reduction of the U.S. security footprint in Europe and Europeans' loss of military capability, NATO members pledged in 2014 to increase their defense spending to 2 percent of their GDP by 2024.⁶¹ Following in the footsteps of previous administrations, President Trump is calling on NATO members to contribute more to its own security.⁶² Concerned with these members' commitment to the alliance, President Trump has been more forceful than his predecessors, calling the alliance "obsolete" and accusing some members of not spending their fair share.⁶³ In his inaugural address, the President said the U.S. has for too long "subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military."⁶⁴

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis backed up President's Trump's stance at his first meeting with NATO officials in Brussels by warning that American support could depend on whether other NATO member met their spending commitments.⁶⁵ He said, "Americans cannot care more for your children's future security than you do. I owe it to you to give you clarity on the political reality in the United States and to state the fair demand from my country's people in concrete

terms.”⁶⁶ He made it clear that America will meet its responsibilities, but that there are limits to American support.⁶⁷

In fact, only five of NATO’s 28 members are meeting the alliance’s target of spending at least 2 percent of GDP on defense.⁶⁸ These include the United States, Estonia, Poland, Greece, and the United Kingdom.⁶⁹ The United States spends the highest proportion of its GDP on defense at 3.61 percent.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, Germany only spent 1.19 percent and France contributed 1.78 percent.⁷¹ On the much lower end, Canada, Slovenia, Spain and Luxembourg all spent less than 1 percent.⁷² It should be noted that defense spending is increasing since members agreed to aggressively pursue the 2 percent spending target in response to Russia’s resurgence.⁷³ However, this spending must continue in an upward trajectory and delinquent NATO members must hasten their attainment of the stated military spending goal.

Permanent basing of a deterrent force in Eastern Europe.

Despite the rhetoric from then-candidate Donald Trump and the current Trump administration, NATO is a key component of American security and global balance. The very existence of the alliance reduces the likelihood of another European conflict resulting in the United States engaging in war with another large power. The alliance itself provides an invaluable security guarantee underwritten by the United States. Proponents believe the stationing of American troops on an ally’s soil (think Baltics and Poland) sends a clear message to potential adversaries that the United States and NATO is willing to go to war if that tripwire is broken.⁷⁴

However, there is disagreement among NATO member states regarding the 1997 Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation (NATO—Russia Founding Act) as to whether permanent basing of NATO soldiers in Central

and European countries is a violation of the agreement.⁷⁵ As to the question of permanent bases, the act states:

NATO reiterates that *in the current and foreseeable environment*, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces. Accordingly, it will have to rely on adequate infrastructure commensurate with the above tasks. In this context, reinforcement may take place, when necessary, in the event of defence against a threat of aggression and missions in support of peace consistent with the United Nations Charter and the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] governing principles, as well as for exercises consistent with the adapted CFE [Conventional Armed Forces in Europe] Treaty, the provisions of the Vienna Document 1994 and mutually agreed transparency measures. Russia will exercise similar restraint in its conventional force deployments in Europe.⁷⁶

Proponents claim the key phrase in the act “in the current and foreseeable security environment” clearly gives the United States and NATO the green light to permanently base NATO in Central and Eastern European countries.⁷⁷ Why? Because the act was agreed upon nearly 20 years ago.⁷⁸ Since then, Russia has engaged in a series of actions which have altered the “current and foreseeable security environment” quite significantly since the early years of the post-Cold War period when Russia was not considered a threat but a potential partner across a wide range of activities.⁷⁹ In today’s security environment, proponents argue the United States

should publicly proclaim the act does not prohibit the establishment of permanent bases in Central and Eastern Europe.⁸⁰

NOTES

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²⁹ Ibid, 3.

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- ³⁸ Ibid.
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